

CULTURAL DIFFERENCE AND CHANGING TRADITIONS OF MEANING IN AFRICAN ART

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African Art and the Colonial Encounter: Inventing a Global Commodity. By SIDNEY LITTLEFIELD KASFIR. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007. Pp. 408. £18.99/\$27.95, paperback (ISBN 978-0-253-21922-0).

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Over the course of the past thirty years, Sidney Kasfir has become known as one of the most critical and conceptual minds in African art history. From the critique of the once prominent 'one tribe/one style' paradigm to the deconstruction of the label of authenticity, she has consistently questioned conventional truths of her discipline. Given this reputation of Kasfir's scholarship, reading the first lines of her latest work puzzles. 'Where does the new come from in an artist's practice', she asks. Well, this is a big questions and one wonders what sort of answers she provides. At first glance, her perspective baffles. After all, focusing on the 'colonial encounter' risks replicating the colonial argument that African culture needs Western intervention in order to 'progress'. Yet Kasfir would not be Kasfir if there were not an edge. Indeed, what matters for her are not questions of artistic production per se but rather issues of representation, including societal self-representation. And here is the point where the story begins.

It is a twofold story. On a personal level, the book reflects Kasfir's biography as a fieldworker. In the 1970s she undertook long and sustained research in the Idoma region in the lower Benue Valley in Nigeria, focusing on masquerades, kingship, colonial history, and the formation of modern Idoma identity. In the 1990s she began new research among the Samburu peoples in Kenya. While the Idoma are sedentary agriculturalists, the Samburu are pastoralists; they herd cattle and live a semi-nomadic life that evades a political hierarchy. However, while in many ways different, Idoma and Samburu share the same cultural ethos: both cultures understand themselves as warriors. Their material culture was and to some extent still is permeated by this ethos, and vice versa. And yet, as much as the two groups share the same self-image, their aesthetic responses to the colonial encounter differed in the same way as the colonial societies changed to perceive each group's material culture and began to view its objects no longer as artifacts but as art. It is this very difference that Kasfir is interested in and that also provides the basis of the second, analytical story.

Kasfir traces and analyzes this story in four comparative parts. The first part outlines the different colonial encounters and representations of Idoma and Samburu warriorhood. Making use of missionaries' and explorers' accounts, Kasfir argues that these texts wrapped the local institutions and practices of warriorhood into a 'discursive field', which also affected the Idoma and Samburu artisanal practice. In the case of Idoma, the result was the colonial banning of warfare and the subsequent transformation of a particular Idoma mask genre formerly celebrating head-hunting. In the case of Samburu, it was the widening of a spear repertory, making spears for the neighboring Turkana and Rendille, a practice that emerged after the British had outlawed the use of spears in Samburiland. Following this finding, the second part explores the roles of the Idoma sculptor and the Samburu blacksmith. In a comparative perspective, Kasfir discusses how the two professions changed and how these changes were very much a result of the specific interrelation, especially with respect to the social, political, and religious status they held. The third part outlines Kasfir's theoretical model. Combining Geertz's metaphor of 'culture as text' with Appadurai's 'social life of

things', she develops the concept of a 'cultural script' in which actors and objects alike are embedded. The result is multiplicities of meaning, a constant and ongoing reworking of (materialized) traditions driven by changing contexts, a theme that Kasfir explores with regard to the changing meaning of objects and the body in the ritual performance of warriorhood. The fourth part, entitled 'commodities', looks at the incorporation of Samburu and Idoma material culture into the artistic and touristic regimes of the West. Again, the trajectories differ. While in the Idoma case the museal tribe and style paradigm allowed for the production of Idoma 'masks', in the Samburu case what mattered was the romantic image/idea of the 'noble savage'. The body substituted the missing mask. As well as becoming part of the regime of collecting, Samburu became part of the regime of looking, with Samburu warriors now appearing both on the celluloid screen and on the sandy beaches of Kenyan tourist resorts as embodied representations of Western desires.

As noted above, the story of the book is twofold. The comparison between Idoma and Samburu also echoes a personal narrative. Both are driven by the quest to come to terms with cultural difference and changing traditions of meaning. The result is a rich and truly mature work, full of insights into artistic production, the idea of newness, and the meaning of the label 'African art'. It breathes the experience of a life devoted to reconciling theoretical sophistication with deep and minute fieldwork; anthropology with art history; a subject-oriented with an object-based perspective. Following such an agenda requires a considerable degree of resistance to the lures of clear positions and easy gains in the 'warrior theater' of academia. Is there a personal echo here? Anthropology has long reflected upon the question of a possible correlation between the site of fieldwork and the writings of a fieldworker. In the case of Sidney Kasfir, one of the freshest minds of African art history, one is inclined to think that such a correlation exists.

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THE CONTRIBUTION OF EVANGELICAL CHURCHES TO DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA

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New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. Pp. xxx + 267. £14.99/\$29.95,
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This book is one of a series of four volumes on 'Evangelical Christianity and Democracy in the Global South'. In the words of Timothy Samuel Shah, the series editor, the project rested on the idea that 'democracy in Asia, Africa, and Latin America needed all the help it could get' and its main objective was therefore to try 'to know how much help, if any, evangelicals were giving' (p. ix). Three regional volumes (Asia, Latin America, and Africa) have already come out, while a fourth one covering global issues is expected in 2011. The book is constructed around six case studies on Nigeria, Kenya, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and South Africa. Written by a team of African scholars mostly based at African universities – a fact rare enough to be worth noting – the six main chapters produce a wealth of new material on evangelical Christianity and its changing roles in the public sphere (even though most of the research for the book was conducted between 1999 and 2002). Terence Ranger, who coordinated the group, discusses